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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

National Intelligence Officers

18 August 1977

MEMORANDUM FOR: The National Foreign Intelligence Board

SUBJECT : Interagency Assessment: South Africa: Policy Considerations
Regarding a Nuclear Test

The attached interagency assessment has been coordinated at a working level; because of pressures of time it has not been reviewed at higher echelons. [REDACTED] of the Center for Policy Support in the Directorate of Intelligence in CIA managed this project.

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National Intelligence Officer
for Africa

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Attachment

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Distribution A

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18 August 1977

INTERAGENCY ASSESSMENT: South Africa: Policy Considerations Regarding a Nuclear Test*

KEY JUDGMENTS

1. It is our judgment that the South African government plans to proceed through the various stages of a nuclear weapons program, including the eventual testing of a weapon.

- We believe that domestic political concerns would argue in favor of testing; and that these concerns weigh more heavily than foreign policy considerations in a decision whether or not to test;

- [] we think that, on balance, military considerations, too, would argue in favor of testing;

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- We do not believe that fear of adverse foreign reaction poses a sufficiently compelling reason for South Africa to avoid a test.

2. Yet we can discern no over-riding pressure on South Africa's leaders to rush to test a weapon in the immediate future; indeed, we think foreign policy considerations could lead them to adopt a flexible attitude toward its timing.

- There would be considerable pressure on Vorster within the cabinet to go ahead with a test as scheduled, to project an image of power at home and abroad, and to demonstrate that South Africa is not to be coerced by foreign threats to its security;
- But Vorster might well be persuaded to delay a test for a short time if there were indications that a major turnaround in U.S. policy toward South Africa was possible, or if he judged that a test could undermine sensitive ongoing negotiations, e.g., on Namibia.

* This assessment has been coordinated at the working level by representatives of the Intelligence Community.

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3. While we thus ascribe some flexibility, or "give," to the South African position regarding the timing of a test, we do not see any circumstances arising which would lead to a termination of their long-standing program to develop a nuclear weapon. We see no credible threat from the West which would be sufficient to deter the South African government from carrying out a test; indeed, threats would, in our judgment, be more likely to harden South African determination.

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NOTE

This paper examines the political and other non-technical factors bearing of a South African decision to test or not to test a nuclear weapon in the near future. It also addresses specifically the further question, what might induce South Africa to postpone a test?

Because of real current uncertainties regarding the state of South Africa's test readiness and the availability now of South African-made fissionable material for a test, assumptions on these points have been made to facilitate consideration of political and other aspects. We have assumed that the South Africans, without specific additional foreign assistance or consent, could conduct a nuclear test within a matter of weeks, and that they could continue their nuclear weapons development thereafter without foreign assistance. If South Africa's test readiness, in fact, depends on receipt of materials from an assisting foreign country, or an acquiescence of that country in a final test decision, another avenue of US counteraction which has not been considered in this paper might become available.

The following assessment is based in part on technical analysis of the program. In the main, however, it reflects the Community's knowledge of the Afrikaner people and their leaders; their perceptions of themselves and the outside world; and the policy imperatives to which they seem most likely to respond.

DISCUSSION

I. Factors Bearing on the Decision to Test/Not to Test

A. Domestic Politics

1. The ultimate and over-riding concern of the South African government is to ensure the survival of the Afrikaner nation. During its 30-year rule the National Party has accomplished this to the satisfaction of its constituents, primarily by achieving a rapid growth in South African economic and military power, subjugation of the non-white majority, and keeping the levers of political power in Afrikaner hands. Under this system the Afrikaner people (and English-speaking whites as well) not only have survived, but have enjoyed high and rising living standards.

2. In the past couple of years, however, things have not been going nearly so well for the Afrikaners. Their leaders, long prone to see South Africa as fighting a lonely struggle in a hostile and misunderstanding world, have increasingly adopted a siege mentality, driven by such events as:

- the end of Portuguese colonial rule;
- the apparent imminence of majority rule in Rhodesia;
- the growth of world support for the guerrillas operating against Southwest Africa;
- the collapse of South Africa's detente policy in southern Africa;
- the broadening condemnation of apartheid by the West;
- the installation of Communist-backed radical regimes in black African states;
- the recent hardening of official U.S. policy toward South Africa.

At home, too, the government has had few, if any, recent successes to demonstrate to its constituents that it is coping effectively with the country's mounting problems, including:

- continuing serious racial disturbances -- the worst in a century;
- a recession that will soon enter its third year;
- the embarrassment of the Angolan intervention;

- sharply rising defense costs;
- growing emigration.

3. Faced with these developments, the testing of a nuclear device would have strong appeal to the Vorster government as a way to restore confidence in the government's capability to keep the present social system intact without significant change and without major concessions to the black majority.

4. We also note that it is consistent with Vorster's personality to favor proceeding with nuclear weapons development and to undertake testing. Vorster throughout his career has shown a strong inclination toward actions which project power and toughmindedness and has made no secret of his personal contempt for world opinion directed at influencing his freedom to make South Africa's decision. This would be an important factor in South African reactions to attempts at forcing Vorster's government not to test a nuclear device. Additionally, Vorster, who has a great interest in his place in Afrikaner history and who has lamented privately that his achievements in maintaining the status quo are not appreciated, may view development of a South African nuclear capability as a dramatic achievement for which he will be remembered.

B. Military Considerations

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6. Since South Africa, even after a test, would probably still be several years away from a dependable delivery capability, it is our judgment that many in the military would favor going ahead with the testing phase as the next step in the long process of acquiring deliverable nuclear weapons. We further believe that the military would defer to political leaders on the decision whether or not to test, and on the timing of a test. For many South Africans, the rationale for going ahead in the development of nuclear weapons stems from a fear that ultimately South Africa faces the threat of being invaded by Communist-backed black regimes and perhaps even by Soviet and Cuban forces. Historically, the Afrikaner response to a perceived threat has been to assume the worst and to prepare for it; and we believe that this attitude will be a major factor in Pretoria's opting to test and continue to develop nuclear weapons.

C. Foreign Policy Considerations

7. We are virtually certain that Vorster is aware that a nuclear test would sooner or later be detected and made known throughout the world. A decision to test must therefore be seen as a conscious decision to defy the

world and to increase greatly the risk of bringing on various combinations of censure and sanctions, as well as jeopardizing any sensitive negotiations South Africa might be engaged in at the time.

8. We find this attitude entirely consistent with the defiant, tribally-oriented cast of the Afrikaner world view, which is based on a strong determination to be able to stand alone as a nation and a desire to demonstrate to the outside world that the Afrikaners will not brook outside interference in their affairs. In short, a test would be viewed as projecting an image of Afrikaner power to the world. While some analysts believe that Vorster would feel this drive could be satisfied merely by possessing the capability to test, most think that he would not rest content without the demonstration effect of a test.

9. We note that the approach to the test phase is but one step -- albeit a critical one -- in South Africa's long-standing, complex program of weapon development. We therefore see the foreign policy objectives of this program as being more general and long-range. A recognized nuclear weapon capability would, in vorster's view:

- break the linkage of the world's image of South Africa solely as the country of apartheid;
- compel the world to pay attention to South African whites (particularly Afrikaners) as a force which must be taken account of;
- exert pressure on all the parties involved in southern African affairs to give more serious consideration to the interests of South African whites.

10. At the same time we believe that Vorster recognized that international reaction to a test would in all probability weaken the chances for moderate influences to predominate in the Rhodesian and Namibian crises, and perhaps enhance Soviet influence in the area. While this consideration would not be likely to prevent a test, it could lead Vorster to delay a test so long as he still perceived significant advantages to be gained from ongoing negotiations.

D. The Question of Sanctions

11. South Africa's leaders cannot separate foreign policy concerns from consideration of censure, sanctions, and other punitive measures which other countries might adopt in the wake of -- or in anticipation of -- a South African nuclear test.

12. We agree that particular sanctions (discussed below) could hurt the South African economy -- particularly if they involved participation of

all the major industrial countries and a few peripheral ones, e.g., Iran and Israel. It is our judgment, however, that the impact of sanctions, even under the most optimistic assumptions about universality of application, would not be felt for at least a year. It was also pointed out that imposition of financial sanctions might lead South Africa to renounce or cease payments on its outstanding short-term debt to the West, amounting to \$3.4 billion.

13. It was noted that South Africa has gone a long way toward achieving its goal of industrial self-sufficiency.

-- It has a 2-3 year stockpile of oil;

-- it has recently claimed to be 80% self-sufficient in industrial machinery and 66% in transport equipment: its two greatest industrial vulnerabilities in the past,

14. In addition, the Vorster government already has cranked into its plans a judgment about the prospect of sanctions. The 1978 budget, for example, reflects a sharp drop in Western credit and the resulting lack of real economic growth.

15. It is our view -- and probably that of the Vorster government -- that it would be extremely difficult to get general and effective Western cooperation in economic or financial sanctions, even in the condition of shrill censure of South Africa that would inevitably follow a nuclear test.

16. Based on all the above, it is the consensus that South Africa's leaders would probably not be deterred from testing a weapon out of concern over the imposition of economic sanctions.

E. The Special Case: South Africa's Peaceful Nuclear Power

17. A separate but related question is whether South Africa's leaders would be willing to jeopardize peaceful nuclear development in the interest of testing a weapon. There are two major elements in this development: fuel enrichment, and nuclear power plant construction. South Africa's dependence in the enrichment case is neither immediate nor great, although the South Africans have been seeking foreign financial and technical aid in its plans to build a much larger plant so as to compete in the world's market for enriched reactor fuel. In the nuclear power program, however, South Africa is critically dependent on foreign sources of supply, particularly France.

18. The power plant program is an important one, planned to provide eventually on the order of 10% of South Africa's power needs. These needs could be met from coal-fired plants, but would involve long-distance power transmission and other extra costs.

19. The enrichment program involves South African plans to export by the mid-1980s some \$400 million of enriched uranium annually -- this would equal four times the value of raw uranium ore exports. While this would be only a small part of total exports (currently running at \$8 billion a year), it nonetheless would mean foregoing a sizable piece of foreign exchange earnings.

20. We estimate that sacrificing foreign assistance for these two programs would eliminate nuclear power possibilities for many years and reduce significantly South African participation in the enriched reactor fuel market.

21. Whether this would affect a current decision to test is uncertain. We think it is a better than even chance that the South Africans already have written off U.S. deliveries -- which probably are not due until 1980-81 -- in the light both of the current worsening in their U.S. relations and earlier foot-dragging by the U.S. in delivering components for these two programs.

II. The Timing

22. In spite of our overall judgment that South Africa's leaders perceive persuasive reasons to continue a nuclear weapon program, including the testing phase and beyond, we do not feel that they are yet under any over-riding pressure to rush to test a weapon in the immediate future. We see this program as having a certain technically-derived calendar or schedule; but this schedule is not unchangeable. There are decision-points along the schedule where Vorster and his inner circle -- whom we believe are in close touch with every aspect of the program -- have the option of moving ahead, delaying for a short period, or cancelling indefinitely.

23. The relevant question, we believe, is not, "why would they test quickly?"; but rather, under what condition or circumstances would they be induced to delay a test shot?

24. We would stress that Vorster would be under pressure, particularly from the hard-liners within his cabinet, to go ahead with a test on schedule. It is our consensus also that the Afrikaner electorate would not be much impressed by anything short of a test shot; and that the Vorster inner circle would be aware of this need for a demonstration effect. Others, for example his foreign minister, might well argue:

-- that there is no urgency to test;

-- that a test might not only complicate current negotiations on Namibia, but would make it difficult for those Americans

(and Europeans) who are sympathetic to white South Africa's cause to exert any influence on U.S. and Western policy toward Pretoria.

25. We judge that there is a somewhat better than even chance that South Africa's leaders would adopt a relatively flexible attitude toward the timing of a test; and that they might be persuaded to delay a scheduled test for a short period if there were indications that a major turnaround in U.S. policy towards South Africa was possible.

26. While we perceive this degree of "give" in the South African position on testing, this give has severe limits.

- We perceive no credible threat which would be sufficient to deter South Africa from carrying out a test; indeed, our reading of the Afrikaner personality suggests that threats would have the opposite effect to that intended;
- We do not foresee any circumstances which would induce South Africa to terminate, or even to postpone for a prolonged or indefinite period, its nuclear weapons program;
- If South Africa were within two to three weeks of a scheduled test, the costs of a prolonged delay and the long lead-time needed before again reaching the test phase would probably be prohibitive.

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